



PRESS RELEASE
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U.S. COAST GUARD MAKES TWO PANAMA EXPRESS COCAINE SEIZURES

U.S. Attorney Paul I. Perez announced today the unsealing of two Indictments upon the arrival in Tampa of nineteen individuals to face federal cocaine smuggling charges. The individuals were detained by the United States Coast Guard on two separate maritime interdictions in the Eastern Pacific last week. On August 6, 2003, in international waters south of Costa Rica in the Eastern Pacific ocean, the Coast Guard apprehended five individuals aboard a "go-fast" vessel, and eight individuals aboard the Colombian fishing vessel, "Jeins." The go- fast and F/V Jeins were within a few hundred feet of each other when the Coast Guard spotted them. As the Coast Guard approached, the crew of the go-fast vessel first passed by the F/V Jeins, signally its crew, and then set the go-fast vessel on fire and abandoned the vessel. The Coast Guard was unable to put out the fire, but was able to recover 37 kilograms of cocaine from the burning debris. The individuals aboard the diesel fueled F/V Jeins were observed emptying gasoline on the deck and outside surfaces of the vessel in what is believed to be an attempt to either mask trace

evidence of the presence of cocaine aboard the vessel, or destroy evidence that the F/V Jeins recently had refueled, or was about to refuel, the go-fast vessel. The defendants are charged with conspiring to possess with intent to distribute over five kilograms of cocaine while aboard vessels subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, as well aiding and abetting in the possession with intent to distribute the cocaine while aboard the vessels. The charges carry a potential sentence, if convicted, ranging from ten years' imprisonment up to life imprisonment.

The United States Coast Guard also apprehended a "go-fast" vessel in international waters off the coast of Colombia on August 10, 2003, when bales of cocaine were observed on board. The go-fast crew of six set the vessel on fire and abandoned the vessel as the Coast Guard approached. The Coast Guard was able to put out the fire and recover in excess of two tons of cocaine from that go-fast. The crews from all three vessels will be prosecuted in accordance with United States law and the detainees were transported to Tampa, Florida for prosecution.

These seizures mark the latest interdictions of drugs on the high seas related to the Tampa-based investigation, Operation Panama Express which has totaled nearly two-hundred tons of cocaine. United States Attorney Paul I. Perez remarked: "We continue to work with the United States Coast Guard in this maritime interdiction effort in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Their efforts continue to have both an immediate and long-term impact on major cocaine trafficking organizations." Participating in the joint investigation dubbed, Operation Panama Express, are: The United States Coast Guard (USCG), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The cases are being prosecuted by

Assistant United States Attorneys Kathy J.M. Peluso and Anthony E. Porcelli of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force for the Middle District of Florida.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty
